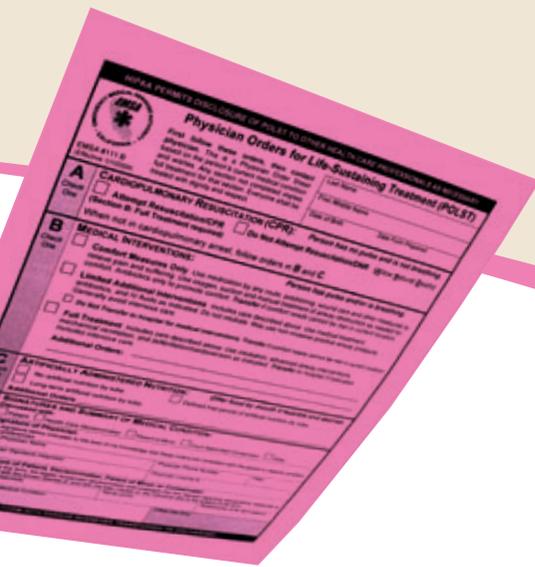


HONORING PATIENTS' END-OF-LIFE WISHES:

A Provider's Guide to POLST
(Physician Orders for Life-Sustaining Treatment)



POLST
CALIFORNIA
PHYSICIAN ORDERS FOR LIFE-SUSTAINING TREATMENT



WHAT IS POLST?

POLST (Physician Orders for Life-Sustaining Treatment) is a physician order that gives patients more control over their end-of-life care. Produced on a distinctive bright pink form and signed by both the physician and patient, POLST specifies the types of medical treatment that a patient wishes to receive towards the end of life. It encourages communication between providers and patients, enables patients to make more informed decisions, and clearly communicates these decisions to providers. As a result, POLST can prevent unwanted or medically ineffective treatment, reduce patient and family suffering, and help ensure that patients' wishes are honored.

Although it's similar, POLST does not replace an Advance Health Care Directive. It's recommended that a seriously ill patient have both a signed POLST form and an Advance Directive.

One of POLST's most important features is that it travels with patients as they move from one residential or medical setting to another, thereby ensuring that the physician orders travel with them.

POLST is making a difference. Studies have shown that among patients with POLST forms, treatment preferences were respected 98% of the time, and no one received unwanted CPR, intubation, intensive care, or feeding tubes. As a result, POLST has helped to close the gap between what end-of-life treatment patients want and what they receive.

Finally, the use of POLST is protected by California Law. Under the law, health care providers are required to treat individuals in accordance with their wishes. The POLST form is an effective tool to communicate those wishes, and POLST law gives immunity from civil or criminal liability to those who comply in good faith with a patient's POLST requests.

POLST: IT STARTS WITH A CONVERSATION

Having a conversation with a patient about end-of-life issues is an important and necessary part of good medical care. POLST provides a framework for guiding the conversation, making it easier to have the discussion, and therefore making it more likely that a patient will express his or her wishes. In this way, POLST is more than just a form; it's a tool to help ensure that patients are making informed decisions and that these wishes are honored across health care settings.

POLST involves a meaningful dialog between patients and physicians, and may also include other members of the patient's care team. Depending on the setting, other trained health care professionals – such as nurses, social workers, or chaplains – may also be a part of the POLST conversation to address physical, psychosocial, and spiritual issues that often arise. Physicians ultimately retain the overall responsibility for the completion and content of the form. And because it establishes medical orders, a physician must sign the POLST form in order for it to be valid.

Once signed by both the physician and patient, POLST becomes part of a patient's medical record. And because it's a dynamic document, POLST can be modified or revoked, based on new information or changes in a patient's condition or preferences.

“POLST gives us a structure for talking with patients about the end of life. Using POLST as a guide, we can talk about some of their most important medical choices.”

— Jim Mittelberger, MD, CMD, MPH, FACP





“EMS providers need to make urgent, split-second decisions. POLST helps us do that by clearly identifying patients’ wishes and their physicians’ orders.”

— Jay Goldman, MD, FACEP, Medical Director,
EMS, Kaiser Permanente Northern California

HOW IS POLST DIFFERENT FROM AN ADVANCE DIRECTIVE?

POLST complements but does not replace an Advance Health Care Directive. An Advance Directive allows individuals to appoint the person they want to speak on their behalf. It provides a broad outline of a person’s wishes relating to end-of-life care and should be filled out by any adult, regardless of one’s health status. An Advance Directive does not carry the weight of a physician order, however, and is often unavailable when needed.

	Advance Directive	POLST
Who?	Every adult	Seriously ill
What?	Broad outline	Specific wishes, actionable physician orders
Where?	Needs to be retrieved, no universal system	Travels with patients across settings

In contrast, POLST is designed for the seriously ill, and identifies a patient’s specific wishes on key medical decisions. In addition, POLST has the force of a physician order, and is designed to travel with a patient from one setting to another.

HOW DOES POLST WORK ACROSS SETTINGS?

POLST works across the continuum of care. It’s the first statewide, uniform physician order that is recognized across care settings. Since the POLST form travels with patients when they move from one residential or medical setting to another, it ensures that the physician orders travel with them. As a result, POLST provides clarity about a patient’s wishes for physicians, nurses, emergency responders, and other health care providers.

California POLST is part of a national effort. The following organizations representing California health care providers support the appropriate use of POLST:

- Aging Services of California
- Alliance of Catholic Healthcare
- California American Association of Emergency Physicians (CALACEP)
- California Assisted Living Association (CALA)
- California Association for Health Services At Home (CAHSAH)
- California Association of Health Facilities (CAHF)
- California Association of Long Term Care Medicine (CALTCM)
- California Association of Physician Groups (CAPG)
- California Association for Nurse Practitioners
- California Hospice and Palliative Care Association (CHAPCA)
- California Hospice Foundation
- Children's Hospice and Palliative Care Coalition
- California Hospital Association (CHA)
- Emergency Medical Directors Association of California (EMDAC)
- Emergency Medical Services Administrators Association of California (EMSAAC)

To learn more about California POLST, call
The California Coalition for Compassionate Care:

1-916-489-2222

or go to:

www.caPOLST.org

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The California Coalition for Compassionate Care (CCCC) provides leadership and oversight for POLST outreach activities in California, with support from the California HealthCare Foundation.